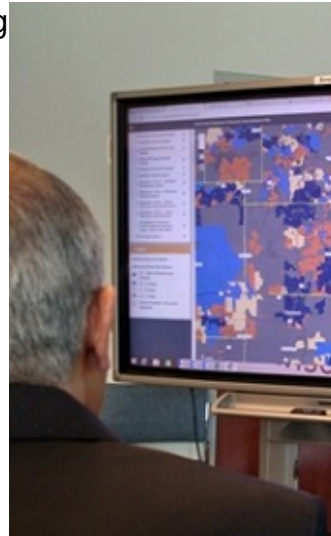


Connect Wisconsin with Better Broadband

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 05 February 2020 10:14

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/broadband-map-northwoods-s5.jpg>



Last week, Sen. Smith introduced the “Better Broadband” package, 6 bills to expand broadband and better connect our communities. Today he covers accessing high speed broadband to guarantee rural prosperity for our future.

MADISON - Governor Tony Evers shined a bright light on the urgency of strengthening our rural communities by calling a special session to take up agriculture bills, creating the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity and establishing the Office of Rural Prosperity. In western Wisconsin, we have an opportunity to step up and continue leading the way.

We should think of rural prosperity as a jigsaw puzzle. Rural prosperity relies on our agricultural industry, job security, entrepreneurial opportunity, tourism, quality schools, community spaces and more. Each individual piece contributing to rural prosperity has a purpose and need. However, these pieces don't create an image and illustrate rural prosperity unless all the pieces are connected.



Access to reliable broadband matters for the many Wisconsinites who want to continue enjoying rural life or for those who want to settle down in a new community. These connections will only strengthen rural prosperity in Wisconsin. Investments in broadband reliability and connectivity correlate to investments in our rural communities – let's make it happen.

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While there may be plenty of good reasons to live in a metropolitan area, I find it hard to believe that most people who grow up in the beauty of rural Wisconsin wouldn't continue living here if they had access to a job or entertainment for themselves or their family.

Reliable internet access would help farmers connect to UW-Extension, potential dealers and markets, loan offices, mental health resources and more. Small town businesses must also be able to connect to the rest of the world to compete and offer the same level of services as any large city business.

Every household and business should be connected, period. In this ever changing world of technology, it's increasingly more possible for employees to work from home and for students to study at home, only IF they're connected to true high speed internet. We must expand broadband to offer the same opportunities in our rural areas to what's available in our metropolitan areas.

Last week, I introduced the "Better Broadband" bill package, 6 important bills to connect communities and help our state attain real rural prosperity. The "Better Broadband" package will:

- Increase funding for broadband expansion grants to \$100 million annually in 2020-21, improve broadband mapping and require internet service providers to disclose to the Public Service Commission which properties have service and their minimum average speed.
- Prioritize grant funding for projects to expand fiber optics to farms.
- Protect consumers by prohibiting companies from advertising their service as "broadband" unless it's capable of providing minimum download speeds.
- Allow a city, village, town, county or the Department of Transportation to require installation of empty conduit lines for future fiber optics expansion.

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- Give municipalities the authority to use broadband expansion grant money for project planning purposes and encourage municipalities to create and expand municipal-owned broadband networks.
- Require grant recipients to provide broadband speeds that are at least 25 Mbps (megabits per second) while downloading and 3 Mbps while uploading, or the speed set by FCC if higher than 25/3.



These proposals seem so logical that many may wonder why we'd need to pass legislation for the proposals to go into effect. But, just like routing electrical power into rural America, government leaders have a responsibility to connect all homes, businesses and communities. While private Internet Service Providers are driven by profit margin, government is driven by the public good.

In today's world, we need high speed broadband to guarantee rural prosperity for our future. Let's put all our best resources, both private and public, into expanding broadband for Wisconsin. We need to make Wisconsin a state that works for all of us. After all, when rural Wisconsin thrives, all of Wisconsin thrives.

The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo and Pepin counties and portions of Trempealeau, Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire and Jackson counties and very small portions of Chippewa and St. Croix counties.